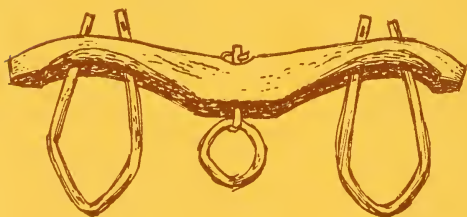


LINCOLN
THE
RAILSPLITTER

WAYNE C. TEMPLE

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LINCOLN
THE RAILSPLITTER



Courtesy of Lloyd Ostendorf

LINCOLN
THE
RAILSPLITTER

BY

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DIRECTOR
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LINCOLN MEMORIAL
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Lincoln Room

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I

The Rails

THE successful presidential campaign of the Republican Party in 1860 was built largely around the theme of Lincoln as a railsplitter.¹ In the “Tippecanoe and Tyler too” campaign of 1840 a similar device had proved highly successful for the Whigs, who chose the log cabin as their symbol of earthiness, and as an added inducement served hard cider to the potential voters. Although the Democratic press laughed at the “humbug” of the “log cabins on wheels, hard cider barrels, canoes, brigs, and every description of painted device,”² the Whigs marched on to victory at the polls, aided by their clever frontier devices. Likewise, the Republicans swept to victory in 1860, greatly assisted by a good campaign slogan identifying Abraham Lincoln — a prominent lawyer long removed from manual labor — with the working man.

A few accounts, written years after the event, have tried to establish the fact that the railsplitting idea was used at Charleston, Illinois, when Lincoln debated there with Stephen A. Douglas on September 18, 1858.³ One story states that there was "an immense streamer across the street, of a man driving ox-teams and mauling rails."⁴ However, a contemporary report describes the same scene thus:

The chief decoration of the day was a gigantic banner, eighty feet long, hung across the street from the Court House to a high building on the west side of the street. On one side was inscribed:

COLES COUNTY
FOUR HUNDRED MAJORITY FOR LINCOLN

On the reverse was a painting of "Old Abe 30 Years Ago," driving three yoke of oxen attached to a yawl-like Kentucky wagon.⁵

Careful search has not yet located a single primary source confirming the use of the rail in 1858. In none of the contemporary newspaper accounts describing the Lincoln-Douglas debates (collected by Edwin E. Sparks) is railsplitting mentioned. In 1858 Abe Lincoln was often referred to as "Long Abe," "Old Abe," "Uncle Abe," the "Giant Killer," or pictured

as an ox-driver, but he had not yet become the "Railsplitter."⁶

The idea of associating Abe Lincoln with railsplitting was born in 1860, the inspiration of Richard J. Oglesby (later Governor of Illinois) and John Hanks (a first cousin of Lincoln's mother). Each claimed that he thought of the idea first. Hanks declared:

One day at home, we heard that the Republican State Convention was to be held at Decatur, and that they were going for Abe for President. As soon as I found this out I went into town and told a friend of Abe's [Oglesby] that, as great and honest merit was at last to be rewarded in the person of my friend Mr. Lincoln, by the Republican party, I thought of the hard and trying struggles of his early days, and recollecting the rails we had made together thirty years ago, made up my mind to present some of them to the Convention as a testimonial of the beginning of one of the greatest living men of the age.⁷

And a few months before he died in 1899, Oglesby related his version of this event to J. McCan Davis, Clerk of the Supreme Court of Illinois:

One day I was talking with John [Hanks] about Abe, and he said that in 1830 they made a clearing twelve miles west of Decatur. There was

a patch of timber — fifteen or twenty acres — and they had cleared it; they had built a cabin, cut trees, mauled rails, and put up a fence.

"John," said I, "did you split rails down there with old Abe?"

"Yes, every day," he replied.

"Do you suppose you could find any of them now?"

"Yes," he said. "The last time I was down there, ten years ago, there were plenty of them left."

"What are you going to do to-morrow?"

"Nothing."

"Then," said I, "come around and get in my buggy, and we will drive down there."

So the next day we drove out to the old clearing. We turned in by the timber, and John said:

"Dick, if I don't find any black walnut rails or any honey locust rails, I won't claim it's the fence Abe and I built."

Presently John said, "There's the fence!"

"But look at those great trees," said I.

"Certainly," he answered. "They have all grown up since."

John got out. I stayed in the buggy. John kneeled down and commenced chipping the rails of the old fence with his knife. Soon he came back with black walnut and honey locust shavings.

"There they are!" said he, triumphantly, holding out the shavings. "They are the identical rails we made!"

Then I got out and made an examination of the fence. There were many black walnut and honey locust rails.

"John," said I, "where did you cut these rails?"

"I can take you to the stumps," he answered.

"We will go down there," said I.

We drove about a hundred yards.

"Now," said he, "look! There's a black walnut stump; there's another — another — another. Here's where we cut the trees down and split the rails. Then we got a horse and wagon, and hauled them in, and built the fence, and also the cabin."

We took two of the rails and tied them under the hind axle-tree of my new buggy, and started for town. People would occasionally pass, and think something had broken. We let them think so, for we didn't wish to tell anybody just what we were doing. We kept right on until we got to my barn. There we hid the rails until the day of the convention.

Before the convention met I talked with several Republicans about my plan, and we fixed it up that old John Hanks should take the rails into the convention.⁸

Jane Martin Johns, the wife of a Decatur politician, confirms Oglesby's claim of having suggested the plan:

He had conceived the idea of presenting Lincoln as the representative candidate of free labor, the exponent of the possibilities for a poor man in

a free state. Recalling the successful Log Cabin and Hard Cider campaign of 1840, he determined to find some one thing in Mr. Lincoln's unsuccessful career as a worker that could be made the emblem of that idea, and a catch word which would make enthusiastic the working people.⁹

Judge Lawrence Weldon, one of Lincoln's friends, stated that Oglesby started the "rail furore." "Oglesby," said Weldon, "arranged that Hanks himself should march into the convention at the proper moment with a rail on his shoulder"¹⁰

It is a fact that Lincoln, writing in 1860, referred to John Hanks as the man "who now engineers the 'rail enterprize' at Decatur."¹¹ But still, this statement does not rule out Oglesby as the originator of the idea, since it simply identifies Hanks. Then too, Oglesby was not as conspicuous as Hanks, who carried in the rails. It is certain that the two men went to collect them together and shared the labor of the enterprise.¹²

II

The Nomination

WHILE the ardent workers of the Republican Party hurried the arrangements for their state convention, to be held at Decatur on May 9 and 10, 1860, the old rails remained in Oglesby's barn. Since Decatur had no permanent building large enough to seat the huge gathering of delegates which was expected, a Macon County committee supervised erection of a "wigwam, 120 by 50 feet in size, with stands, seats, and all the necessary appointments for the use of the Convention."¹³ This temporary structure of wood and canvas was "sufficiently large to accommodate not only the delegates, but also 'outsiders' who may honor us with their presence."¹⁴ But the convention proved to be even larger than expected. On Monday, May 7, the advance guard reached Decatur, and "every train . . . contributed its quota, filling the city to its utmost capacity."¹⁵

Among the early arrivals was Lincoln himself. Thurlow Weed recalled that "it was arranged that Mr. Lincoln should appear at this meeting, although not as a delegate."¹⁶ Joseph G. Cannon, who then practiced law at Tuscola, was in Decatur the day before the convention and found Lincoln already there. In reply to a question about his candidacy, Lincoln said, "I'm 'most too much of a candidate to be here, and not enough of one to stay away!"¹⁷ Although Ward H. Lamon later related that Lincoln "had no special interest in the proceedings, and appears to have had no notion that any business relating to him was to be transacted that day,"¹⁸ such was not the case. Before the convention assembled there was a movement abroad to secure the state convention's support for Lincoln as the Republicans' candidate for President.¹⁹ In fact, though Oglesby later insisted that "Abe had not known that the rails were to be brought in,"²⁰ Lincoln should have been fully aware that there was to be a great to-do over some rails which he had split many years before. A Decatur correspondent for the *Illinois State Journal* announced for all to read:

Among the sights which will greet your eyes will be a lot of rails, mauled out of Burr Oak and Walnut²¹ thirty years ago by old Abe Lincoln and John Hanks, of this county. They are still sound and firm, like the men that made them. Shall we not elect the Rail Mauler President? His rails, like his political record, are straight, sound and out of good timber.²²

Evidently Oglesby, or one of the several Republicans with whom he shared the secret, gave the story to the press before the convention opened. Certainly most of the alert delegates learned about this stunt by word of mouth before the actual episode took place. Lincoln always read the *Illinois State Journal*, and he must have seen this notice too.

The opening day of the convention, May 9, was pleasant, but somewhat cool, since it had rained the previous day.²³ "The wigwam was crammed with about 3,000 persons, and there were 1,000 or 2,000 more outside, during the morning session; and whenever the crowd cheered, which was not seldom, one had to anchor himself to the ground to prevent being raised off his feet."²⁴ At 10:00 a.m. the session was called to order by Jackson Grimshaw of Adams County. John M. Palmer of Macoupin

County was named temporary president and the work of organizing the convention began.

After a recess for lunch the delegates reassembled at 2:00 p.m. for the afternoon session. John Gillespie of Madison County was chosen as the permanent president, and the serious work of electing delegates to the Republican National Convention, as well as the slate of state candidates, was begun. Gillespie made a brief speech. Then somebody noticed that Lincoln was in the audience. Immediately a motion that he "be invited to take a seat with the officers of the convention was passed with three cheers for 'Old Abe' as he came forward" and took the proffered seat of honor.²⁵

After this commotion subsided, the convention proceeded to the task of nominating a candidate for Governor. An informal ballot was taken "by a call of counties, *viva voce*," but none of the leading candidates — Norman B. Judd, Leonard Swett and Richard Yates — had a majority. So the next step was a formal ballot, and a slight delay resulted.²⁶

Pending this first ballot, Oglesby arose and "announced to the delegates that an old Democrat of Macon County, who had grown

gray in the service of that party, desired to make a contribution to the convention.”²⁷ This was the cue for John Hanks and another man, Issac D. Jennings, to bring the rails into the wigwam.²⁸ The convention accepted the proposal eagerly, and “forthwith two old time fence rails, decorated with flags and streamers were borne through the crowd into the convention, bearing the inscription:

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The Rail Candidate

FOR PRESIDENT IN 1860

Two rails from a lot of 3,000
made in 1830 by [John] Hanks and Abe Lincoln
— whose father was the first pioneer
of Macon County.²⁹

The effect was electrical. One spontaneous burst of applause went up from all parts of the “wigwam,” which grew more and more deafening as it was prolonged Of course “Old Abe” was called out, and made an explanation of the matter. He stated that, some thirty years ago, then just emigrating to the state, he stopped with his mother’s family for one season in what is now Macon County; that he built a cabin, *split rails* and cultivated a small farm down on the Sangamon

River, some six or eight miles from Decatur. These, he was informed, were taken from that fence; but, whether they were or not, he had mauled many and many better ones since he had grown to manhood. The cheers were renewed with the same vigor when he concluded his remarks.³⁰

Oglesby, John Hanks and the other ardent Lincoln supporters had succeeded in stampeding the Illinois convention in favor of naming Lincoln as their candidate at the forthcoming national convention. As the uproar gradually died away, the delegates proceeded to ballot for the gubernatorial candidate. After the third ballot Swett threw his votes to Yates, who was nominated on the fourth ballot. Yates "declared himself for the nominee of the Chicago Convention, but expressed a preference for Mr. Lincoln."³¹

Yes, the remainder of the Illinois convention was an anti-climax; however, during the morning session of the second day's proceedings, "Judge Palmer offered a resolution, that Abraham Lincoln is the choice of the Republican party of Illinois for the Presidency, and that the delegates to the Chicago Convention be instructed to use all honorable means to secure his nomination and to cast

the vote of the state as a unit for him. Carried unanimously.'"³²

Lincoln was now well started on his way toward the Executive Mansion, and old John Hanks had a profitable enterprise. He sold his two rails for a fancy price and then brought back a wagon load, which he stored in Oglesby's barn. These he sold for a dollar apiece.³³ But since Hanks could not read or write, his friend Oglesby was persuaded to keep books for him and send the rails out to purchasers. As Oglesby complained later, John Hanks received "all the money," but he "had all the trouble."³⁴

When Charles Hanks, a brother of John Hanks, learned of the fence rail episode at Decatur, he immediately exclaimed that the fence had burned five years after Abe Lincoln and John Hanks had constructed it! Some Republicans asserted that Charles Hanks had not written the letter which made this disclosure in the Decatur *Magnet*, so he wrote another letter, dated Macon County, August 13, 1860, saying that his first statement "relative to brother John and cousin Abe Lincoln" was certainly true and that he had indeed written it. "I pronouce emphatically," continued Charles

Hanks, "*that I have never retracted from what I have written, nor do I intend doing so. Every word stated in my letter is true.*"³⁵

When this newspaper story began to circulate, John Hanks wrote to Lincoln and asked him about the matter. Lincoln replied, very carefully, that he had "never lived in the same neighborhood with Charles Hanks 'til I came to Macon County, Illinois, after I was twenty-one years of age." Well, the rails were supposed to have been from Illinois — not Indiana — so Lincoln's statement does not brand Charles Hanks a liar. Then Lincoln admitted that "the year I passed in Macon County I was with him a good deal — mostly on his own place, where I helped him at breaking prairie [*sic*], with a joint team of his and ours, which in turn, broke some on the new place we were improving." In closing Lincoln wrote, "Don't let this letter be made public by any means."³⁶

Were the famous rails actually those split by Abraham Lincoln or had the fence burned long before the convention at Decatur? Perhaps the answer will never be known, but Charles Hanks did at least one service for Lincoln: he

corroborated John Hanks's statement that Abe Lincoln had split rails.

Four days after the state meeting ended, Republican delegates converged upon Chicago for the national convention. Members of the Illinois delegation kept their pledge to Lincoln and worked as hard as they could for their favorite son. At noon on May 15 the Republican National Convention met at the Chicago wigwam for the important business at hand. Two days later, when the time came for nominations, Lincoln's managers took advantage of the large number of Illinois men present and packed the wigwam long before the session convened.³⁷ If volume of noise and demonstration antics are effective in influencing delegates, Lincoln had a decided advantage. As a result, when Judd presented his name the audience "greeted this nomination with perfectly deafening applause, the shouts swelling into a perfect roar, and being continued for several minutes, the wildest excitement and enthusiasm prevailing The pressure for Lincoln was tremendous."³⁸ And he received the victory on the third ballot.

At no time during the Chicago convention were the delegates allowed to forget that Abe Lincoln was the "Railsplitter."

The Chicago *Press & Tribune* building was illuminated from "turret to foundation" by the brilliant glare of a thousand lights On each side of the counting-room stood a rail — out of the three thousand split by "honest Old Abe" thirty years ago on the Sangamon river bottoms. On the inside were two more, brilliantly hung with tapers whose numberless individual lights glistened like so many stars in contrast with the dark walnut color of the wood [Republicans] collected in crowds at the several hotels and, shouldering rails, marched in joyous triumph through our streets.³⁹

III

The Campaign

THE fence rail symbol immediately spread throughout the North. One correspondent returned to Cincinnati after the convention and reported that along with cheers for “Old Abe,” all along the line “at every station . . . there were . . . boys carrying rails . . . who were delighted with the idea of a candidate for the Presidency who thirty years ago had split rails on the Sangamon River — classic stream now and forevermore — and whose neighbors had named him ‘honest’.”⁴⁰

This campaign promised to be one of the most interesting and colorful since 1840. Even the *Chicago Press & Tribune*, a staunch Lincoln backer, pointed out the similarity of the two campaigns by asking: “Log Cabins and Hard Cider Come Again?”⁴¹ But instead of log cabins springing up overnight, there were wigwams, patterned after the ones at Decatur and Chicago.

These temporary structures served as headquarters for the rank-and-file Republicans, and here the party leaders met and mapped their campaign strategy, not the least of which was keeping before the public the fence rail story. The working man liked to associate Lincoln's youthful toil with his own labors. "Every man who is struggling to improve his fortune by honest toil and patient endeavor," explained one reporter, "feels that in Abraham Lincoln he has a generous and confiding friend, and a dignified representative."⁴²

Railsplitter clubs were organized throughout the northern states. As the Pennsylvania delegates left Chicago, "they declared that in thirty days the whole Keystone State would be mauling rails with frantic enthusiasm. The old fence at Decatur is being bought up at ten dollars per rail and forwarded by express to all parts of the country . . . nothing can frustrate the irrepressible desire for 'those rails'."⁴³ One man wrote a personal letter to Lincoln, begging him to see that "a *piece of a rail*, or a *rail entire*, with the splitting of which you had some connexion" be forwarded to his Lincoln club.⁴⁴ Another man made walking canes from

the old rails and petitioned Lincoln for a lock of his hair to place inside the heads, which were also to contain his picture.⁴⁵ Photographs of Lincoln were mounted in frames made from the old rails. Their special appeal was to the Lincoln Club rooms. One typical campaign illustration showed "Lincoln, Splitting Rails; a striking likeness, with a flat-boat in the distance."⁴⁶ At the Republican rally in Springfield, Ill. "a flat-boat on wheels, representing Lincoln's early experience at New Salem," paraded near a float depicting "railsplitters at work."⁴⁷ Every Republican was rail-conscious. New Jersey promised "to furnish at least *seven rails* for the electoral college *fence*, by which Democracy is to be barred out from the avenues of power."⁴⁸ Lincoln's eldest son, Robert, was often referred to as "The Prince of Rails."⁴⁹ This nickname was suggested to the people by the visit of the Prince of Wales to Springfield on September 26, and it clung to Robert even after the election.⁵⁰

Many of the original Railsplitter clubs became known as the Wide Awakes. These were probably the first Lincoln groups in the country. On March 3, 1860, the Hartford

(Connecticut) Wide Awakes were organized. Thirty-six young fellows formed this initial group of Lincoln advocates. Their constitution stipulated that each member "shall provide for himself, at his own expense, a glazed cap and cape, and shall pay into the treasury the sum of seventy-five cents, which shall entitle him to the use of a torch for parade." One member brought with him a new "Improved Frame for Swing Lamps and Torches" which had been designed by L. Pirkin, a Hartford tinsmith.⁵¹

In New York City, for example, by September, only the Eighteenth Ward club still clung to the name Railsplitters.⁵² However, the rail theme was still as prominent as ever. In the Wide Awake parades each man was generally equipped with a thin rail, a torch or lantern, a glazed cape and hat. The Wide Awake clubs were "the greatest feature of the campaign of 1860 . . . semi-military in character, political in purpose, and . . . unparalleled in the political annals of our country."⁵³ Chicago had an organization called the Lincoln Rangers which was ultra-military; they drilled in the armory!⁵⁴

Whenever the Republicans held ratification meetings or rallies, fence rails were sure to be an important feature of the publicity. Springfield held a "Grand Rally" on August 8 with five speaking stands. Oglesby spoke from one of these, and in the course of his speech he called up to the platform his partner in the original rail demonstration — old John Hanks. "Now, John Hanks," Oglesby questioned him, "in the presence of this vast multitude, I ask you, did you not split 3,000 rails with Abe Lincoln in Macon County . . . ? To which Hanks replied, "We certainly did." Great roars of applause followed his declaration. Overnight John Hanks became somewhat of a national hero. "Thousands took his hard and horny hand in theirs with a pleasure greater, no doubt, than they would have felt in clasping that of any scion of royalty, however worthy."⁵⁵

Campaign newspapers were established, and many capitalized upon the rail theme. There was a *Rail Splitter* issued at Chicago from June 23 to October 27, 1860, and Cincinnati also published a weekly paper called *The Rail Splitter*, which ran from August 1 to October 27.

Democratic newspapers made fun of the "silly subterfuges of the Republicans to get up enthusiasm for their presidential ticket," and one declared that the country needed a "hair splitter, not a 'rail splitter'." ⁵⁶ Another poked fun at Lincoln thus: "We feel great confidence in the abundant good nature of Mr. Lincoln, that sooner than have any difficulty or hard feeling with his Southern friends and neighbors, he would go amongst them and split a few thousand rails on reasonable terms, and talk these small matters over in a friendly way, with a view of an entire reconciliation in the family." ⁵⁷

Nevertheless, the "Railsplitter" swept on to victory, just as had "Tippecanoe." The maul and wedge became as much part of the Lincoln tradition as his new beard. Tad Lincoln did not think it was in bad taste to sing in the White House:

Old Abe Lincoln, a rail splitter was he,
And he'll split the Confederacee [*sic*].

When reproved by a friend, he replied, "Everybody in the world knows Pa used to split rails." ⁵⁸

IV

But How Many Rails?

DID Lincoln spend as much time splitting rails as legend would lead us to believe? In his autobiographical sketch in the third person, written for the campaign of 1860, Lincoln said:

His father and family settled a new place on the north side of the Sangamon River, at the junction of the timberland and the prairie, about ten miles westerly from Decatur. Here they built a log cabin, into which they removed, and made sufficient of rails to fence ten acres of ground, fenced and broke the ground, and raised a crop of sown corn upon it the same year. These are, or are supposed to be, the rails about which so much is being said just now, though they are far from being the first, or only rails ever made by A[braham].⁵⁹

However, when Lincoln later sent a brief autobiographical sketch to Jesse W. Fell, then the secretary of the Republican State Central

Committee on December 20, 1859, he merely stated: "I was raised to farm work, which I continued 'til I was twenty-two."⁶⁰ But farm work in those days included railsplitting, so Lincoln's statement to Fell does not contradict his earlier account.

In fact, on March 6, 1860, Lincoln declared that he had been a railsplitter. At New Haven, Connecticut, Lincoln said, "I am not ashamed to confess that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flat-boat — just what might happen to any poor man's son!"⁶¹

R. Y. Bush, a nephew of Sarah Bush (Johnston) Lincoln, also testified to Abe Lincoln's railsplitting. After visiting President Lincoln during the early months of 1865, Bush wrote that the people were "working him very hard at Washington and if he had not been raised to *maul rails*, he could never stand the hard labor at the White House."⁶²

Old John Hanks also recalled that "though it is not pleasant to refer back to it, well do I remember when we set out together in the cold winter to cut and maul rails on the Sangamon River, in Macon County, thirty years ago, to

enclose his father's little home, and from day to day kept at work until the whole was finished and the homestead fenced in."'⁶³

When William Dean Howells was writing a campaign biography of Lincoln, he sent James Quay Howard to interview people who had known Lincoln. Among those questioned were George Close, who said that he had known Lincoln when he had lived near Decatur and had "helped him make rails for James Hanks and William Miller. Made about 1,000 together."'⁶⁴

There is also proof that Lincoln split rails in Indiana before moving to Illinois. William Jones of Gentryville (Spencer County) collected several white oak fence rails from the farm of Josiah Crawford, Jr., where Lincoln had worked in 1825. These rails, Jones said, had been split by Abraham Lincoln, and he gave one to the Evansville (Indiana) *Daily Journal* and he forwarded another by the Adams Express Company to Lincoln at Springfield, Illinois. Said the editor of the *Daily Journal*, "This specimen of our candidate's handiwork is unquestionably genuine, as Mr. Jones is not a man to play a trick upon the credulity of the public."'⁶⁵

Lincoln had lived about two and one half miles north of Josiah Crawford, Jr., and it is known that he did work for this farmer. In 1860 Crawford himself identified the rails which Lincoln had split for him. It seems that Lincoln had cut these rails for animal pens and made them longer than the usual ten foot length, and he had also notched them to make them fit together more tightly. Also, Lincoln had helped Crawford build hewed-log buildings and had sawed lumber with him. These neighbors of Abraham Lincoln had seen the power of the "Railsplitter" at work in the forest.⁶⁶

And in addition to these statements of affirmation, there are accounts by other acquaintances or close friends which minimize or try to refute Lincoln's railsplitting. Henry C. Whitney, one of Lincoln's companions on the circuit, explained that, "there was more romance than substance about this railsplitting. Lincoln was not a hard worker."⁶⁷ But Whitney knew Lincoln only as a lawyer — not as a farm worker. John Conness, Senator from California during Lincoln's administration, went so far as to claim that Lincoln had

told him personally "that he never split a rail."⁶⁸ This seems to be an exaggeration of something which Lincoln may have said.

Probably the most reliable account of Lincoln's admissions is told by Noah Brooks, an intimate and highly trusted friend of Lincoln. Brooks accompanied the President on his visit to General Hooker's Army of the Potomac (April 4-10, 1863) and heard him recount his experiences as a woodsman. Brooks reported:

We were driving through an open clearing where the Virginia forest had been felled by the soldiers, when Mr. Lincoln observed, looking at the stumps, "That's a good job of felling; they have got some good axmen in this army, I see." The conversation turning upon his knowledge of rail splitting, he said, "Now let me tell you about that. I am not a bit anxious about my reputation in that line of business; for if there is anything in this world that I am a judge of, it is of good felling of timber, but I don't remember having worked by myself at splitting rails for one whole day in my life." Upon surprise being expressed that his national reputation as a railsplitter should have so slight a foundation, he said, "I recollect that, some time during the canvass for the office I now hold, there was a great mass meeting, where I was present, and with a great flourish several

rails were brought into the meeting, and being informed where they came from, I was asked to identify them, which I did, with some qualms of conscience, having helped my father to split rails, as at other odd jobs. I said if there were any rails which I had split, I shouldn't wonder if those were the rails.'" Those who may be disappointed to learn of Mr. Lincoln's limited experience in splitting rails may be relieved to know that he was evidently proud of his knowledge of the art of cutting timber, and explained minutely how a good job differed from a poor one, giving illustrations from the ugly stumps on either side.⁶⁹

The proximity of Brook's account to the time of Lincoln's relating it gives it more weight than other later reminiscences. But it is well to note that Lincoln merely stated that he could not remember "having worked *by myself* at splitting rails for one whole day in my life.'" Several other men testified that he had worked with them, and never did Lincoln declare that he had worked alone in producing fence rails.

But Lincoln was an expert with an ax. John Hay, one of Lincoln's private secretaries, also attests to Lincoln's skill as an axman. In his diary on August 13, 1863, he notes that Lincoln had objected to a statue by Hiram

Powers, called "The Woodchopper," because the woodsman did not make "a sufficiently clean cut." And Ward Hill Lamon, a man who had been Lincoln's law partner in Danville, Illinois, reported that Lincoln "was intensely fond of cutting wood with an axe; and he was often seen to jump from his buggy, seize an ax out of the hands of a roadside chopper, take his place on the log in the most approved fashion, and, with his tremendous long strokes, cut it in two before the other man could recover from his surprise."⁷⁰

Yes, Abe Lincoln was certainly an expert woodsman and we may well remember this tall strong man with an ax in his hands. Although he surely must have split many rails when he farmed with his father, he was more proud of of his skill with the ax, and he probably felled more timber than is commonly known.



NOTES

NOTES

1. Some of the information in this book was published by the author in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, XLVII, 20-34 (Spring, 1954).
2. *Illinois State Register* (Springfield), June 5, 1840.
3. The account by Emmet Glassco, son of Matt Glassco who is said to have driven a large wagon with men on it splitting rails, is in S. E. Thomas, *Lincoln-Douglas Debate . . . in Charleston* (The Teachers College Bulletin, No. 86, Oct. 1, 1924), 7-8; it was read as a paper at Charleston, Ill., Sept. 18, 1908.
4. "How Lincoln Came Here in 1858," Charleston (Ill.) *Daily News*, Aug. 17, 1908.
5. *Chicago Press & Tribune*, Sept. 21, 1858.
6. *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (Springfield, Ill., 1908), 44, 82, 137, 325, 317. Henry C. Whitney states that it was the Decatur convention of 1860 which "injected into the canvass the novelty and glamour of the 'rail-splitting' episode; which took like wild-fire." *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln* (Boston, 1892), 84. *The Illinois State Register*, June 12, 1860 quotes the *Chicago Times*: "During the canvass in this state in 1858, not one word was ever heard of Lincoln's services as a rail splitter Not one word was breathed about his having labored as a flat boatman, or toiled at splitting rails! Those two events of his life were discovered and made known, for the first time, at Decatur, in May, 1860." The *Chicago Times*

- maintained that Orville Browning had used the rail-splitting device in his campaign against Stephen A. Douglas for a congressional seat in 1843.
7. John Hanks to *Illinois State Chronicle* (Decatur), reprinted in the *Cincinnati Rail Splitter*, Aug. 15, 1860.
 8. J. McCan Davis, *How Abraham Lincoln Became President* (Springfield, Ill., 1908), 56-58.
 9. Jane Martin Johns, *Personal Recollections of Early Decatur* (Decatur, 1912, 80.
 10. Lawrence Weldon, "Reminiscences of Lincoln as a Lawyer," *The Independent*, XLVII, 451 (Apr. 4, 1895).
 11. Roy P. Basler, Marion D. Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, 1953,) IV, 64.
 12. Oglesby to Hanks, Springfield, Ill., May 20, 1865, in William E. Barton, *Additional Information: The Lincoln Cabin on Boston Common* (Peoria, 1929), n. p.
 13. *Illinois State Journal* (Springfield), May 3, 1860, quoting *Illinois State Chronicle* (Decatur).
 14. *Illinois State Journal*, May 7, 1860, letter to editor, Decatur, May 4.
 15. *Ibid.*, May 10, 1860, letter to editor, Decatur, May 9.
 16. *Memoir of Thurlow Weed* (Boston, 1884), II, 291.
 17. Jewell H. Aubere, "A Reminiscence of Abraham Lincoln: A Conversation with Speaker Cannon," *The World's Work*, XIII, 8528 (Feb., 1907).
 18. Ward H. Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Boston, 1872), 444.

19. "Address of Richard Price Morgan" in Isaac N. Phillips, ed., *Abraham Lincoln By Some Men Who Knew Him* (Bloomington, Ill., 1910), 86-87; Thomas J. McCormack, ed., *Memoirs of Gustave Koerner* (Cedar Rapids, 1909), II, 82; *Chicago Press & Tribune*, Apr. 28, 1860.
20. Davis, *How Abraham Lincoln Became President*, 59.
21. Oglesby said the rails were "black-walnut" and "honey-locust."
22. *Illinois State Journal* (Springfield), May 7, 1860, letter to editor, Decatur, May 4.
23. J. G. Randall and T. C. Pease, eds., *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning* (Springfield, 1925), I, 405. Browning attended the convention, but he did not mention the rail incident.
24. *Illinois State Journal* (Springfield), May 10, 1860, letter to editor, Decatur, May 9.
25. *Chicago Press & Tribune*, May 10, 1860, dispatch from Decatur, May 9.
26. *Ibid.*; *Illinois State Journal* (Springfield), May 12, 1860.
27. *Ibid.*, May 11, 1860.
28. "Recollections of Judge Franklin Blades" in *Abraham Lincoln By Some Men Who Knew Him*, 114-115. Blades was a delegate to the convention. Jennings later became sheriff of Macon County.
29. Lincoln's father, of course, was not the *first* pioneer in Macon County.
30. *Illinois State Journal* (Springfield), May 11, 1860.

31. *Ibid.*, May 10, 1860 telegraphic bulletin from Decatur, May 9.
32. *Ibid.*, May 11, 1860, bulletin, May 10.
33. Davis, *How Abraham Lincoln Became President*, 59.
34. James T. Hickey, "Oglesby's Fence Rail Dealings and the 1860 Decatur Convention," *Jour. Ill. State Hist. Soc.*, LIV, 5-24 (Spring, 1961).
35. *Campaign Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), Aug. 25, 1860.
36. Lincoln to John Hanks, Springfield, Aug. 24, 1860, Basler, Pratt and Dunlap, eds., *Coll. Works of Lincoln*, IV, 100.
37. N. Y. *Tribune*, May 19, 1860; *Koerner's Memoirs*, II, 85.
38. N. Y. *Times*, May 19, 1860, dispatch from Chicago, May 18.
39. *Chicago Press & Tribune*, May 19, 1860.
40. *Ibid.*, May 22, 1860, quoting Murat Halstead in *Cincinnati Commercial*.
41. *Ibid.*, May 19, 1860.
42. *Ibid.*, May 30, 1860, letter from Champaign County, May 25.
43. *Ibid.*, May 22, 1860.
44. George W. Copeland to Lincoln, Boston, June 18, 1860, Robert Todd Lincoln Coll. of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, Library of Congress. Copeland was president of the Lincoln Club of South Reading, ten miles from Boston.
45. John M. Murry to Lincoln, Decatur, June 1, 1860, *ibid.*

46. *Chicago Press & Tribune*, June 18, 1860.
47. *Illinois State Journal* (Springfield), Aug. 9, 1860.
48. *Chicago Press & Tribune*, May 30, 1860.
49. Mrs. James C. Conkling to her son Clinton, Springfield, Oct. 20-22, 1860, Ill. State Hist. Lib.
50. *N. Y. Herald*, Feb. 12, 1861.
51. J. Doyle DeWitt, *Lincoln in Hartford* (Privately Printed, [1960]), 13.
52. *N. Y. Herald*, Sept. 20, 1860, letter signed "Rail Splitter."
53. *Ibid.*, Sept. 19, 1860.
54. *Chicago Press & Tribune*, Sept. 28, 1860.
55. *Illinois State Journal* (Springfield), Aug. 9, 14, 1860.
56. *Peoria Democratic Union*, June 22, 1860.
57. *Illinois State Journal* (Springfield), quoting *Jonesboro Gazette*.
58. Julia Taft Bayne, *Tad Lincoln's Father* (Boston, 1931), 165.
59. Basler, Pratt and Dunlap, eds., *Coll. Works of Lincoln*, IV, 63.
60. *Ibid.*, III, 511-512.
61. *Ibid.*, IV, 24.
62. R. Y. Bush to John F. Hall, April 5, 1865, in Carl Sandburg, *Lincoln Collector* (N. Y., 1949), 109.
63. *The Rail Splitter* (Cincinnati), Aug. 15, 1860, quoting *Illinois State Chronicle* (Decatur).
64. Howard's Notes, R. T. L. Coll., Library of Congress.

65. Evansville (Ind.) *Daily Journal*, June 2, 1860.
66. *Southwestern Indiana Historical Society Annals*, 1920-1925.
67. Whitney, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln*, 74.
68. Allen Thorndike Rice, ed., *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln* (N. Y., 1886), 566.
69. Noah Brooks, "Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, XXXI, 227 (July, 1865).
70. Lamon, *Life of Lincoln*, 326-327.





Colophon

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ERRATA

- P. 10, line 5: Read Joseph Gillespie instead of John Gillespie.
- P. 15, line 8: Read May 16 instead of May 15.
- P. 23, line 18: Delete the word "later"
- P. 24, line 6: Read "other" instead of "earlier"
- P. 28, line 14: Read Brooks', not Brook's.

